'Wobblies' bring union history to town

■ Veteran labor organization relocates its national headquarters from San Francisco to Ypsilanti.

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At first glance, the storefront along Michigan Avenue in Ypsilanti looks like any other boutique or coffee shop. A fresh pot brews in a corner, near where a few tables sit empty, save for a few ashtrays and some weathered books.

But it doesn't take long to see that this isn't your average coffeeshop. Notice the poster advocating Gov. John Engler's arrest for crimes against the working class and the various slogans calling for the formation of "One Big Union."

The Wobblies have come to Ypsilanti.

Earlier this year, the Industrial Workers of the World – the radical labor union that first rose to prominence 90 years ago – moved its international headquarters from San Francisco to Ypsilanti, taking up residence in the modest quarters at 103 W. Michigan Ave.

According to IWW General Secretary Fred Chase, the union moved its headquarters to Ypsilanti from San Fransisco in January after Chase was elected to the head the union.

"This job doesn't pay the best wages, so they had trouble getting people to move to San Fransisco when they were elected," said Chase. "So we decided to move the union to me."

In many ways, the union hall is as much a museum as it is an office and meeting center. The front room is cluttered with rare books on unionism and radical politics, while posters depicting class struggle cover the walls.

On the top shelf of a glass-doored cabinet in the rear of office is a wooden box containing some of the ashes of martyred IWW songwriter Joe Hill.

"But I don't view it as us just trying to save our history," Chase said. "That's important, but I want us to move forward based on our principles."

Even though Chase lives in Ann Arbor, he said it made more sense to move the office to Ypsilanti because of its strong blue-collar ethic.

"Ypsilanti is a working-class city," he said. "We felt we'd fit in better here."

The IWW was formed in 1904 by a small group of organized labor activists who had become disenchanted with what they saw to be an anti-industrial attitude on the part of the American Federation of Labor, which was the big labor union coalition of the era.

"'One big union,' that was the rallying cry," Chase said. "It was a reaction to

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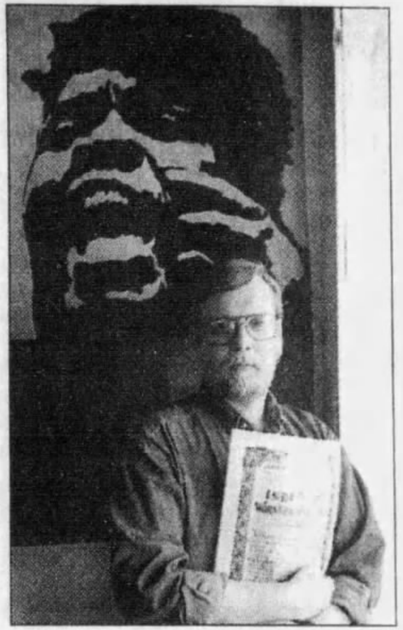

Fred Chase, chairman of the Industrial Workers of the World, holds the organization's charter. Behind him is a painting of activist Dessie Woods.

NEWS PHOTO
DOUG ELLIARD

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WOBBLIES: Union brings colorful past to Ypsilanti

the AFL not really wanting to deal with industrial organizations."

Although other unions often opposed it, the IWW – thanks to the leadership of colorful figures like "Big" Bill Haywood – gained momentum through the early part of the century, organizing coal miners in the south, factory workers in the north and lumberjacks and railroad workers in the Pacific Northwest.

According to legend, hobos couldn't ride trains in the northwest unless they carried IWW cards, which prompted many to join the union.

Known by this time as the "Wobblies," the union organized thousands of workers and led several major strikes, including one in Detroit against Studebaker in 1906, during which more than 6,000 workers refused to work.

Along the way, the IWW cultivated a romantic mystique. Figures like Helen Gurley Flynn, a beautiful and inspirational socialist orator, and Joe Hill, the songwriting activist who was executed in Utah after his conviction on what many still believe to have been trumped-up murder charges, became folk heroes to the labor movement.

At its peak, the IWW boasted a membership of about 50,000 members, although that fell to around 125 members by 1960, Chase said. The rise of the new left in the early 1960s boosted membership to about 400, which is where it remains today.

"But we've always had more influence than our membership would suggest," Chase said.

Among the IWW's current membership are folk singer and raconteur Utah Phillips and British protest singer and labor activist Billy Bragg, as well as recycling workers in Berkeley, Calif., and small print shop employees across the country.

The union is currently trying to organize teaching assistants in Scotland, Chase said.

"We'll organize anybody," he said, adding that individuals can also join the union on a sliding scale ranging from $5 to $12 a month. "The only thing we require is that our members are workers and that they don't have the power to hire and fire people."

That's the IWW's strength, said Elise Bryant, a University of Michigan labor specialist and a longtime IWW member.

Despite its small size, she said the IWW still plays an important role in the organized labor movement.

"Small workplaces where people feel the need to join together but don't want to be swallowed up by big unions are attracted to the IWW," she said. "If you have a sort of leftist, progressive political outlook and feel a need to be part of a union – the Wobs are it."

Like Haywood, Hill and Flynn before him, Chase brings a colorful history to the IWW.

A soft-spoken man who chain-smokes Marlboro Lights and considers his words before he speaks them, Chase first joined the union in 1968, after he met an organizer at a Students for a Democratic Society convention in Ann Arbor.

"Someone mentioned that that the Wobblies had always supported draft resistance," Chase recalled. "That was all I needed to hear."

In the early 1970s, he spent a few years in a federal prison in Minnesota for destroying government draft files, serving for a while with former White Panther Party member Skip Taube.

In the 1970s, Chase organized employees of the University Cellar bookstore in Ann Arbor into the IWW. The workers stayed with the union until the store closed in the 1980s.

After University Cellar closed, he worked for a while at Willow Run Airport before his election to the head of the union last year.

Most days find Chase working the phones at the office, dealing with concerns from union members from all over and trying to organize evening events at the headquarters, including workshops on dealing with bosses, discussion groups and labor-related films.

"People come in and a lot of them say, 'Who are you guys?,' " Chase said. "But then others come in and they're like, 'Wow, it's the Wobblies.' "